

"Creativity was not encouraged"

Attending a One-Room School in the 1940s

by Loren N. Horton

I started to school at Brushwood #5 in the fall of 1938, and at that time a "primary" grade preceded first grade. Although I began in primary, I was promoted to first grade after the first two months. Perhaps this was because my parents had taught me to read and count before I started to school.

Generally attendance ranged from 10 to 15 students during the school year, in all grades combined. Actually not all grades were represented in the school every year. Sometimes there was one other student in my grade, and sometimes there were as many as four. Although attendance was usually pretty good, the student body fluctuated as farmers who rented land moved in or out of the district. Since this event always happened on the first day of March, it meant students moved in and out of the district at that time too.

Our schoolhouse was a rectangular wooden building, painted white, but not painted very frequently. The windows on the north and south sides were without screens but did have large mesh wire nailed over the outside, perhaps to deter breakage. During my third grade the school acquired what were called "ventilators," sliding metal devices in wooden frames, which could be placed under the sash of an open window, allowing some fresh air to come in, but not flies and bees. The door, on the east end, did not fit tightly, and rain and snow sometimes crept in.

Inside, opposite the door, a blackboard and Palmer Method letter sheets covered the west wall, with the teacher's desk and chair and a recitation bench in front. One of the big blackboard sections was cracked and was held together with bolts. I remember that the crack used to look like a river running across the board. We used white chalk and had to take the erasers out to the cement slab in front of the front door and pound the dust out of them periodically. Sometimes that was a reward and sometimes that was a punishment.



Loren Horton in third grade.

If we had maps I don't remember ever seeing them. Neither did we have a picture of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln hanging on the walls. We did have a flag, which was mounted on a pole on the northeast exterior corner. But we did not have a flag at all for at least the first three years I attended.

The younger students sat on the north side of the school room, at smaller desks. There were both double and single desks, and they were individually screwed to the floor, not to movable planks. A compartment or bin under the fixed tops of the desks held books and tablets. Each desk had a grooved slot for pencils and a round hole for an ink well. We never used ink

all the six years I attended Brushwood.

I started to school with a #2 lead pencil, a box of Crayolas, and a Big Chief tablet, which had a red cover with a drawing of a Plains Indian, complete with feather headdress. The lines were widely spaced and the paper was cheap pulp. Each student also had a foot ruler, a rubber eraser, and a jar of paste. I don't recall any other school supplies.

The school day allowed for a morning recess, an afternoon recess (each about 15 minutes long, and this included time for a trip to the boys' or girls' outhouse), and an hour noon break. In good weather we ate the noon meal outside, and in bad weather we ate it at our desks. We carried this meal from home in what we called "dinner buckets." Mine was filled with such things as sandwiches, fresh fruit (apples, pears, or grapes when they were in season), and, quite often, a boiled egg. Sometimes there were cookies or a piece of cake—of course, "homemade." The sandwiches were always on "boughten bread," and the filling might be "boughten" bologna, or "boughten" peanut butter, or "boughten" cheese, or maybe a fried egg or jelly. Each

item was carefully wrapped in wax paper by my mother.

A water bucket sat on a bench in the back of the schoolroom. Everyone drank from the same dipper, and I don't remember anyone having a separate glass or cup to use. Actually, I don't really remember ever taking a drink of water. There was a washpan for washing hands but I don't remember ever using that either, and I have no recollection of soap or towel.

Neither do I remember ever having to carry water from a neighboring house, although it must have been done, because the school well, located in the vicinity of the frog pond, had holes in the cover through which rabbits and other small animals and birds fell into the water. It was not only unfit to drink or wash with, it smelled really bad.

During the summer, the grass and weeds in the school yard had plenty of time to grow tall, and just prior to school starting it was the job of one of the directors to mow the tall, thick-stemmed weeds. After that, of course, the weeds were like spikes sticking up from the ground. Since we usually went barefooted for the first few weeks of school, these sharp weed stalks added an element of risk and danger.

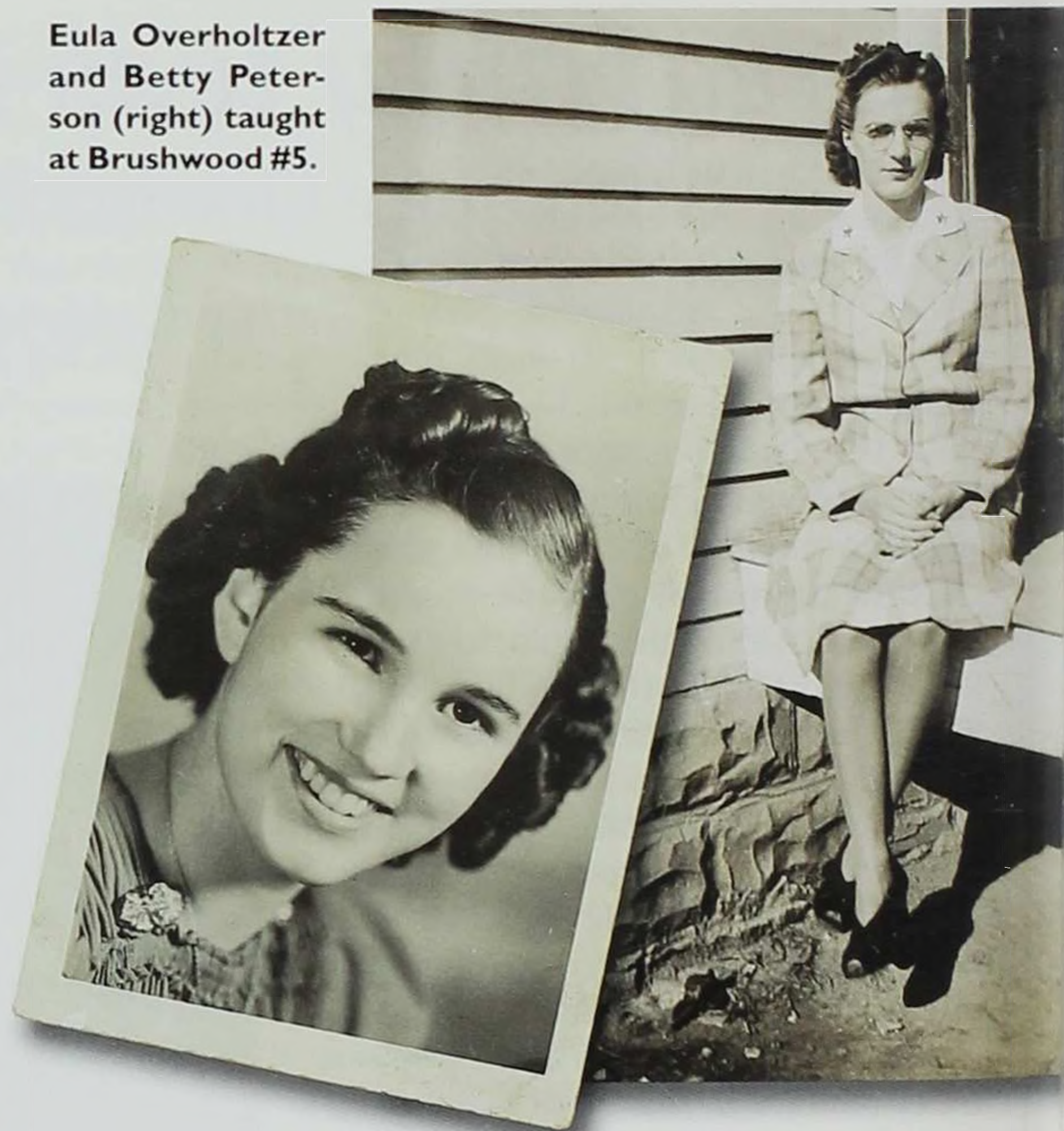
Clumps of buck brush and stands of oak and shagbark hickory trees covered about three-quarters of the school grounds, so shinnying up tree trunks and jumping down was a common recess activity. One time I miscalculated and landed on one of the weed stalks. Some days later a large chunk of stalk emerged from the bottom of my foot. It seemed about a foot long at the time but was actually about half an inch. Anyway, it was long enough to hurt a lot. There was no school nurse, nor did the situation require a doctor. After I arrived home that afternoon (having walked home barefooted on the dirt road), my parents soaked my foot in kerosene and then put iodine on it. I had to wear shoes to school from then on. For several years following, that piece of stalk was kept in a glass bottle.

That experience paled beside the time one year when I went to school barefooted on September 26 and it snowed during the day. No one brought me any shoes so I walked home barefooted in the snow that afternoon.

That mile between home and Brushwood seemed much longer when the weather was really cold, or the roads were really muddy. But I often detoured through neighbor's pastures to avoid the mud. I had to be careful about that, because animals would be in the pasture, and sometimes the ram, the boar, or the bull could be mean.

The plum thickets, grape vines, sumac brush, and

Eula Overholtzer and Betty Peterson (right) taught at Brushwood #5.



osage orange hedge rows between our house and the school invited dawdling on the way home, although not on the way to school. On rare occasions a student would bring to school a "hedge ball" or "hedge apple" from the osage orange trees, and we would spend recess throwing it at each other. If it hit someone, its sticky white juice made a real mess on clothes and in hair.

During recess or the noon hour, other unorganized games included fistfighting and wrestling and chasing one another. I don't recall any grievous injuries from these activities. On rainy or snowy days when we had to play inside, a favorite game was Hide the Thimble. For quieter times, we made Cat's Cradle out of string or formed Church and Steeple with our hands.

Among our organized games were Drop the Handkerchief, Fox and Geese, Blackman, Hide and Seek, and Johnny May I Cross Your River. The latter game involved everyone lining up and one person being "it." Someone in the line would ask: "Johnny, may I cross your river?" The person who was "it" would say: "Yes, you may cross my river if you are wearing something _____" and then name a color. Then everyone in the line would run to another line, and the person who was "it" would try to touch someone, hoping that the person was not wearing anything of the color announced. If the person who was "it" succeeded, then the touched person became "it." Often I deliberately carried to school

a handkerchief with a border of red, blue, green, brown, and yellow. I was trying to be prepared.

Another favorite game was Andy Over, which involved one side throwing a basketball over the roof of the coal shed to students on the other side. I remember the game only vaguely, but part of the point of it was to catch the ball on the other side, and then run around the building and throw the basketball as hard as one could at the students who had thrown it.

During my second-grade year a basketball hoop and bang board were erected southeast of the school house, and also two poles with a cross bar that was to test jumping ability. (I was entered in the county jumping contest that year in Osceola but failed to clear anything higher than the third rung.) We even had a basketball that year, but I don't remember using it to play basketball as often as it was used to play Andy Over.

Except for Mansel Burchett, all of the teachers were from out of the neighborhood. That meant that they had to take room and board with some family in the neighborhood during the week. Usually they stayed with one family the whole term of school, although I understand that it was the custom in some other districts for the parents to take turns giving housing and meals to the teacher.

The county superintendent of schools, Ada Tillotson, used to come on periodic visits. I suppose this must have been stressful for the teachers, but I looked

forward to Miss Tillotson's visits. She was a friend of my family, and besides that, she brought books from the county library that we could keep until her next visit. Then we exchanged them for different ones. (During the summer my parents would take me to her office in the courthouse in Osceola, and Miss Tillotson would again let me borrow books from the county library to take home to read. That was a real treat. I don't know if other students got to do that or not, but I really appreciated it.)

Our textbooks were usually either borrowed from older students or purchased from the Woolworth's 5 & 10 cent store in Osceola. There were two books in the school library about astronomy, and I remember reading them during times when I had my assigned lessons completed. A white enamel metal cabinet along the south wall contained the "library," although there weren't many books in it. We did have a big dictionary. We also had a globe, although it was cracked and fell off of its stand when it was whirled.

One curious incident occurred during geography class one day. We were studying France, and the name of the city of Bordeaux was mentioned in the text. No one knew how to pronounce it except me, and the others, including the teacher, seemed to doubt that I was pronouncing it correctly. The reason I knew it was pronounced "bor-dough" was that my uncle Harvey had been stationed there during World War I. The other students and the teacher all pronounced it as "bor-dee-ax."

I was very bad in arithmetic and would sometimes

Brushwood students pose outside their school in 1944. The author, Loren Horton, is in the center, back row.



secretly take home problems because I couldn't get them done at school. I thought that was not permitted, but actually I doubt if anyone knew or cared. Homework was not a concept with which we were familiar.

Science was not emphasized, and I don't remember a single science lesson during the entire six years. One fall we were sent out into the nearby timber to collect samples of leaves and seeds. Perhaps that was for science. We did decorate the schoolroom with bittersweet berries and colorful leaves during the fall.

The school possessed a Victrola and three records (one of them was cracked), and that was our music instruction. The only songs I recall having to sing were "Do You Know the Muffin Man" and "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" (sung in unison, not as a round).

Art was occasionally taught and usually involved cutting out construction paper patterns. These often represented holidays, both in color and in subject matter. We would cut out orange pumpkins and black witches at Halloween, brown turkeys and black pilgrims at Thanksgiving, green evergreen trees, white snowmen, and red bells at Christmas, red hearts and red flowers at St. Valentine's Day, and brown rabbits and multicolored eggs at Easter (that is when the box of Crayolas came in handy). Often the results of this art were pasted

to the window glass so that people driving by could admire them. Other art projects were drawing trees, which were geometrically measured so that the trunks were parallel lines and the foliage had to be a certain proportion wider than the trunk. Creativity was not encouraged in art—nor in much else.

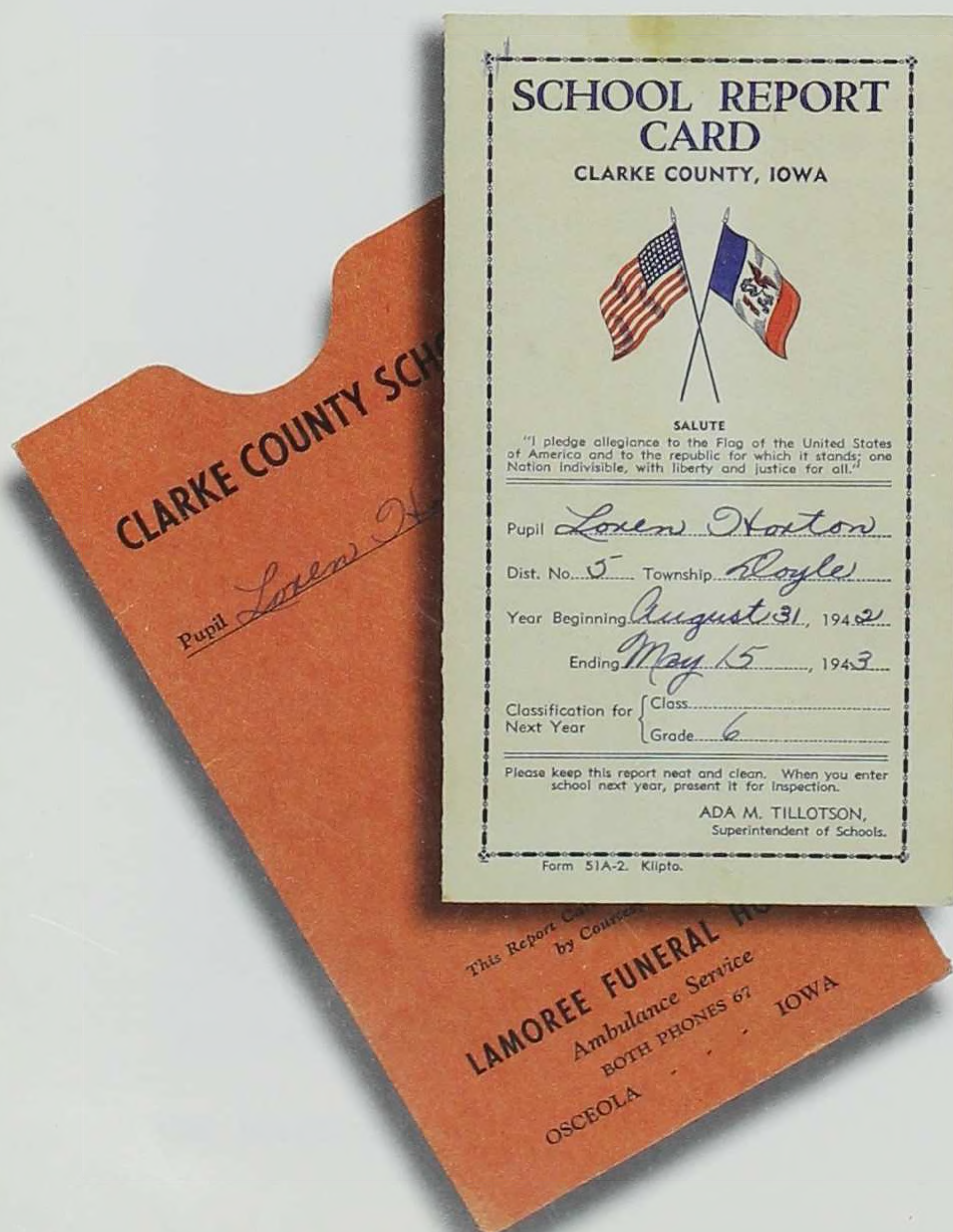
Some teachers would read to the entire school body the first thing in the morning. I remember such books as *Susan Beware!*, *Leather Pants*, and *That Printer of Udell's* being read. Interest in the latter waned, and the teacher never finished the book.

When a grade ahead of me was reciting, I would listen, so that when I actually got into that grade the next year I had a head start and already knew much of the material. We were often asked to memorize declamations and poems, and I still remember the opening lines of some. Among those I memorized were "The Landing of the Pilgrims," "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck," the first stanzas of "Hiawatha" and "Evangeline," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "Concord Hymn," "The Blue and the Gray," "The Children's Hour," "The Village Blacksmith," and probably some others. I never had any difficulty in doing the actual memorization, but I sometimes faltered when the time came to recite in front of the class. I was not yet confident enough to speak well in public.

We received report cards at the end of each six weeks' period. Flags decorated the front of the folded report card (left), and on the back was a space for a student's deportment grade. (I distinctly remember that on the brown folder in which my report card was enclosed was an advertisement for Lamoree's funeral home in Osceola.)

Since my mother and father had each been school teachers earlier in their lives, they contributed to my learning process. Among other things, they assigned me to learn the names of all the state capitals and all the counties of Iowa. I learned the counties from a map, by going from left to right, beginning with the row on the northern border. I also learned the numbers of the counties in alphabetical order, something that used to be on the automobile license plates. To this day I think of Clarke County as Number 20.

My father tried, rather in vain, to teach me to do rapid calculation in my head, a skill he learned while attending Iowa Business College in Des Moines. I never quite mastered it. My mother expanded my historical and literary horizons by reading to me and then by having me read from her textbooks of Greek mythology and stories of the Punic Wars. I knew more about Icarus and Pericles and Hannibal and people like that than I did about people alive in the 20th century. These things



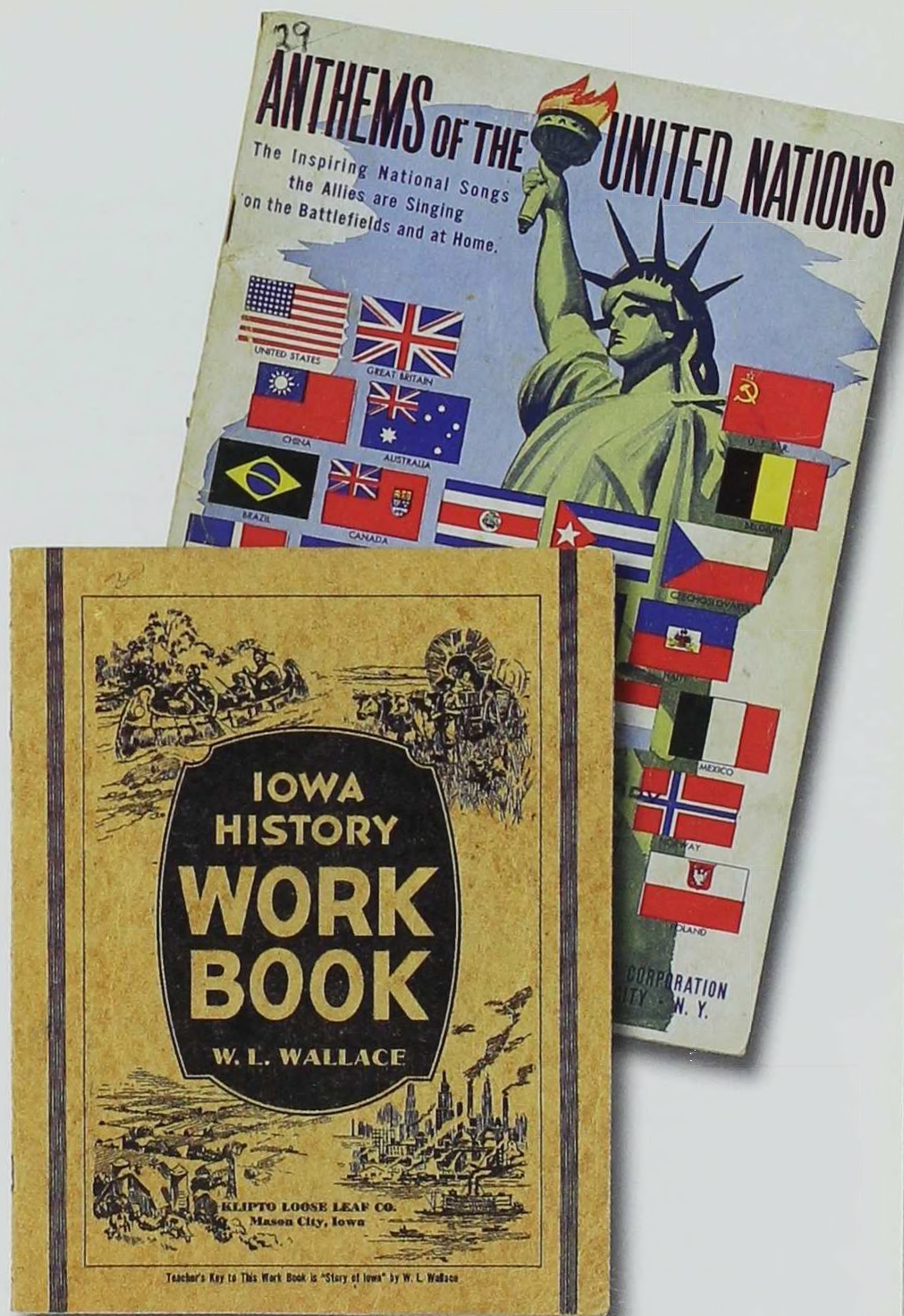
were more interesting and real than some things that might have proved to be practical or useful.

Because our home did not yet have electricity or radio on December 7, 1941, we did not hear about the bombing of Pearl Harbor until the next day, when we were in a store in Creston. We did subscribe to a newspaper, but since it came by Rural Free Delivery, it was always delivered a day later than the date on the paper itself.

We got electricity on December 23, 1941, through REA—the Rural Electrification Administration, part of the so-called “alphabet agencies” of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Thereafter I often listened to the radio before and after school. I remember listening to *Uncle Stan and Cowboy Ken* on radio station WHO from 7:45 to 8:00 a.m., so I must have started to school after 8:00. That program was sponsored by Cocoa Wheats cereal, so of course I ate my Cocoa Wheats while I listened. The program also included an “electric eye” through which the hosts claimed they could watch boys and girls during the “dressing race.” Curiously enough, one week the boys would win three of the five days, and the next week the girls would win three of the five days. The show also advertised items that could be obtained by sending in so many box tops from the Cocoa Wheats package. Among the prizes I got that way were a telephone (consisting of two cardboard microphones connected by a piece of string), and a decoder ring that glowed in the dark.

My favorite afternoon programs included *Jack Armstrong*, *Captain Midnight*, and *Terry and the Pirates*. Of course I had to make sure that my chores were completed on time or I wouldn’t get to listen to any of them. It was when I turned on the radio one April afternoon to listen to *Jack Armstrong* that I first heard the news of the death of President Roosevelt. All regular programming was interrupted. I ran out to my parents, who were working in the garden, to tell them. They came in to listen too, and chores were not done on time that night.

We seldom had visitors at school other than the county superintendent of schools. Sometimes somebody’s mother would come for a half hour or so and sit in the back of the room, making everyone nervous. I don’t ever remember anyone’s father coming to visit. But the whole neighborhood did come to the Christmas programs, the pie and box suppers, and the cake walks. Students had to clean up the schoolhouse before those events and make sure that books and



Books used by the upper grades at Brushwood in the 1940s.

tablets were securely in the bins beneath the desks.

Cleaning the schoolhouse included sweeping it, of course. The floor was made of rough boards, and in order to keep down the dust and dirt the teacher would use sweeping compound, an oily, reddish stuff that looked a bit like sawdust. It was not pleasant when some of it got down the back of a student’s neck while the student was wearing long underwear, which we all did from November to March. The only way the sweeping compound could get down a student’s neck was if another student put it down there. It happened on occasion.

On the night of a community event, kerosene lanterns lit the schoolhouse (it was not wired for electricity). Pie suppers, box suppers, oyster soup suppers, and cake walks—all of which had nothing to do with school—were held in the schoolhouse. For the cake walk, people walked around in a circle, stopped by a particular cake, and then sat down to eat it with the